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# Learning From the Hope of Our Veterans

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PERSPECTIVE

## Learning from the hope of our veterans

By Rachel Van Cleave

I have previously written about the valuable perspective student veterans bring with them to law school and how their experiences and knowledge can enrich classroom discussion about the rule of law and democracy. More recently, I have been impressed with what I am learning about both the training military personnel undergo and their deployment experiences that can teach us all valuable lessons about resilience, grit and perseverance. Veterans also have a lot to teach us about hope. While preparing for combat is not at all the same as preparing to be a lawyer, there are similar mindsets and approaches that are valuable for both endeavors.

After reading Helen Thorpe's "Soldier Girls" and Marcus Luttrell's "Lone Survivor," I remain convinced that we all have more to learn. Both the training and the combat service described in these books clarify that mental preparation is at least as crucial as, and connected to, physical training.

Physical training tests one's mental grit to push through the voices that doubt one's ability to succeed and emphasizes the need to remain focused on the physical challenge at hand rather than anticipating what is coming next or, the "future pain," as Luttrell describes it. This also includes a high degree of trust in the training process; that the goal is to ensure that men and women are prepared for the challenges they will confront, not to humiliate them. Another aspect of the right mindset relates to the importance of believing in the final positive results, whether making the cut to be a Navy SEAL, or successfully navigating a mine-ridden road to transport necessary supplies.

For law students, these lessons are instructive. Of course law school does not equate to preparation for combat, but the mental approach a student assumes can have a dramatic impact on not only a student's success, but also his or her resilience to preserve the values and motivation that brought him or her to the law. The volume



Associated Press

Navy veteran Jim Gibson of Redding was one of the many veterans honored on Nov. 7 at Mistletoe School in Redding.

of information often overwhelms new law students, as does the training approach that helps one "think like a lawyer." Coaching students to understand this is part of the process and encouraging them to focus on each step along the way can encourage a growth mindset and instill confidence in students. This can support resilience in the face of the traditional Socratic pedagogy that many students find alienating.

The Socratic method has emphasized objectivity that often sends a message to students that their sense of fairness or their emotional reaction to a case is irrelevant to the logic necessary to be successful. Law professors have recognized this issue and work to alter their pedagogy to retain what's valuable about this method while helping students bring their values into the logical analysis. Coaching small groups of students to ease the transition to law school and to the profession while providing repeated feedback will help them develop grit and trust. The more students trust in the process of learning to think like a lawyer, and the more support they have in their transition to the legal profession, the more likely they will be happy, ethical and excellent lawyers who are ready to tackle the world's challenges.

Another important theme relevant to the experience and success of law students is that of resilience, which many veterans espouse both in their military experience and in their transition to the civilian world. In "The Sandbox," Mike Liguori writes poignantly of his struggles with post-traumatic stress and thoughts of suicide. Yet, he credits his deployment and fighting post-traumatic stress with making him stronger every day. In addition, he has dedicated himself to easing the transition for other veterans as they reintegrate into society. This expression of hope and purpose is inspiring. I have seen this among other veterans — whether law student veterans, veterans we have hired at my law school, or veterans our students have assisted with benefits claims — they have chosen to be optimistic. Similarly, the women in "Soldier Girls" found deep value in the adversity they faced while deployed and in the relationships they formed with others. Despite the rigors of it all, they would not trade their experience for something different. That is resilience.

Again, law school is not combat, but it is challenging and tests student resilience. Along with hard work, confidence and belief in one's abilities are crucial to success. This is something the military does with excellence.

Understanding how those in the military confront challenges can help law students muster the courage to trust in themselves and in the processes they need to achieve success in law school and in legal practice. This mindset can also remind students of their broader goal of helping others — what brought most of them to law school in the first place.

For example, one Vietnam Navy veteran who was exposed to Agent Orange had been denied health care by the Department of Veterans Affairs for over 30 years, and even congressional intervention had failed him because his records were lost in a fire at a VA facility. He never gave up, not on himself or on the process. He trusted that things would work out, and they did when he met our students in our Veterans' Legal Advocacy Center who worked to get him access to this care and continue to work for him on his compensation claim. Our students were energized by the act of helping someone who had struggled for so long. The veteran wrote a letter thanking our students while describing how difficult the last 30 years have been, yet he ended on a hopeful note. He quoted Friedrich Nietzsche, "He or she who has a why to live can bear almost any how."

This reminds me not only of how much Veterans have already given for our country, but how much they continue to teach us, if we only listen. This Veterans' Day, take a moment to reflect on what has been given by those who have served, and how their unerring determination and resilience can improve your life, your practice, or the lives of those around you. Let us similarly adopt these watchwords in

helping our veterans find the peace now that so eluded them in war.



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